

COMPREHENSIVE READING LEADERSHIP PROGRAM

Questions & Answers

Publishing Information

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**Comprehensive Reading
Leadership Program**



What was the “Reading Crisis” that led to the funding of the California Reading Initiative?

In late April 1995, major newspapers reported that California’s 4th graders scored among the lowest in the nation on the 1994 National Assessment of Educational Progress exam, with almost 60 percent unable to demonstrate a basic understanding of what they read. This test is considered the nation’s only valid tool for state-by-state comparisons of elementary student achievement. In the United States, only 4th graders in the territory of Guam read **less** well than those in California and Louisiana. More precisely, it appeared that 59 percent of California’s students performed below basic levels as compared to 44 percent of the nation’s students. Most newspaper editors and readers interpreted these results to mean that California had too many children unable to read at acceptable levels.

California’s poor showing holds true no matter how the results are sliced. California’s 4th graders whose parents graduated from college, which is considered a good predictor of a child’s achievement level, scored near the bottom among such children nationwide. The state’s white, Latino, African American, and Asian American students scored near the bottom of their respective national groups as well.¹

Key state legislators, educators, and others publicly declared in May 1996 that improving reading achievement must become the state’s top priority.

Our crisis in reading is serious.
It is time to act.

(pg. 14, *Every Child a Reader*)

¹National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 1994 Reading Assessments, U.S. Department of Education.

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Q How do the instructional components of the initiative differ from the whole language practices that were emphasized in the adoption of the 1987 *English/Language Arts Framework* and instructional materials?

The 1987 *English/Language Arts Framework* provided a needed focus on the importance of high quality literature books as the basis for an integrated language arts program. For a variety of reasons, the emphasis on literature and the reading of core books as the heart of the reading program was interpreted to be an abandonment of systematic skills instruction on how to read, particularly in the early grades. With the publication of the 1996 Program Advisory, *Teaching Reading* and the implementation of the California Reading Initiative, the need for balanced, comprehensive reading programs has been clarified. Reading specialists have long acknowledged that systematic, direct, explicit teaching of critical skills should be carried out within a “strong, literature, language, and comprehension program that includes a balance of oral and written language.” *Teaching Reading* identifies the following necessary components for pre-kindergarten through grade three programs: phonemic awareness; letter names and shapes; systematic, explicit phonics; spelling; vocabulary development; comprehension and higher-order thinking; and appropriate instructional materials.

The heart of a successful reading program is the relationship between explicit, systematic skills instruction and literature, language and comprehension.

(pg. 4, *Reading Program Advisory*)

Q Is this just another educational fad? Why or why not?

Throughout the Spring of 1996, the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, the State Board of Education, the Governor’s Office, the California Department of Education, and the Commission on Teacher Credentialing collaborated to develop the program advisory on early reading instruction entitled *Teaching Reading: A Balanced Comprehensive Approach to Teaching Reading in Pre-kindergarten Through Grade Three*. The preface of this program advisory establishes that there is sufficient guidance now available from research about how children best learn to read and about how successful reading programs work to ensure that virtually every child will learn to read well at least by the end of third grade.

The parties who developed the program advisory believe that its recommendations should send a message to all stakeholders involved in education in California that a change of course in the teaching of reading has occurred. The parties also believe that it is crucial that the children of California be provided with the most effective instructional methods and materials possible and then be held to high standards of achievement.

Q What kinds of results should we expect from the impact of the California Reading Initiative if it is adopted in a local district?

Expected reading achievement results need to be determined by districts and schools. Clearly, if grade three is a benchmark year for demonstrating reading proficiency, then the continuum of instruction in grades kindergarten through grade 2 should be seamless while recognizing and adjusting for an individual child’s actual learning. With class sizes of 20 in the primary grades, attainment of grade level expectations by nearly every child must be a goal that is supported and pursued.

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Clear accountability measures should be identified by schools and districts to assess the reading achievement of every child. In the absence of a state-wide system of assessment and accountability, local school boards need to adopt a local system for measuring student performance. Reading/language arts standards and grade-level expectations need to be developed and applied to ensure appropriate progression across the grade spans.

Schools and districts should provide every teacher with a variety of assessment tools and strategies necessary to inform daily instruction. In the early grades, screening methods must be based on a balanced view of reading that addresses both decoding skills and other language skills directly linked to successful comprehension. The skills relevant to phonological awareness, the alphabetic principle, and orthographic awareness (letter-sounds and spelling) can be assessed with word lists that begin with single letters and progress to more complex words. Texts used for the assessment of fluency and comprehension should also be ordered with respect to difficulty. By assessing these measures three or four times a year with children in kindergarten through grade two, teachers can detect which children are falling behind in classroom instruction and are thus candidates for early intervention.

The goal is that every student should be reading independently and comprehending fully no later than the end of third grade.

(pg. 2, *Teaching Reading*)



How do we know whether our district's current reading program and instruction is effective?

Every child must have access to a high quality, balanced instructional program. The Program Advisory, *Teaching Reading* states: "It was determined that a balanced and comprehensive approach to reading must have:

- (1) a strong literature, language, and comprehension program that includes a balance of oral and written language;
- (2) an organized, explicit skills program that includes phonemic awareness (sounds in words), phonics, and decoding skills to address the needs of the emergent reader;
- (3) ongoing diagnosis that informs teaching and assessment that ensures accountability; and
- (4) a powerful early intervention program that provides individual tutoring for children at risk of reading failure."

Board members need to look for evidence that balanced instruction is at the core of every school's reading program. There is sufficient guidance now available from research about how children best learn to read and about how successful reading programs work to ensure that virtually every child will learn to read well at least by the end of third grade. The components of existing school and district reading programs should be compared to the recommendations in *Teaching Reading* and any needed adjustments should be made.

Additionally, if extensive professional development in reading and language arts occurs during every academic year, with time allotted to study, discuss, think, try, revise, and coach, then solid, well-grounded changes needed in teaching and the instructional program can occur quickly, easily, and effectively.

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**The key to improving reading
and literacy instruction
in California is
professional
development and
teacher preparation.**

(pg. 15, *Building a Powerful Reading Program*)

**Q What changes in beginning reading
programs are recommended in the
initiative?**

Changes in any program must be carefully and collaboratively planned and supported with appropriate materials as well as training. A two- or three-year design for full program implementation will likely be most successful.

The Program Advisory, *Teaching Reading*, contains two parts. Part I, "The Reading Program," focuses on the essential components of a complete program of early reading instruction, with specific guidance in systematic, explicit skills instruction and other essential components of an early reading program; classroom diagnosis; program assessment; and early intervention strategies, including family-school partnerships that support student learning and home learning. Grade-level expectations and examples of classroom activities are also included.

Part II of the advisory, on recommended instructional guidance and support, addresses the planning necessary to support classroom implementation, including the development of local standards and ongoing professional development. In addition, the appendix of the program advisory suggests a sample reading curriculum timeline for grades preschool through grade eight.

**Q What kind of evaluations and
assessments should be in place?**

Schools and districts need to provide every teacher with a repertoire of diagnostic tools to monitor and modify instruction continuously, to ensure every child's optimal development, and to identify students who need help in reading. Use of multiple measures of reading is important, especially the use of standardized group measures to measure overall reading achievement and informal, criterion-referenced tests to measure the achievement of component skills in reading.

The program advisory identifies phoneme awareness, letter name recognition, phonics, spelling, vocabulary, and reading comprehension as curricular areas that merit direct instruction, and therefore, should be considered for direct assessment.

In kindergarten, first, and second grades, the focus of assessment should be on individual diagnosis rather than on group standardized achievement tests. Diagnostic tools should be curriculum-based measures, including teacher observations and assessments of word recognition and reading comprehension. At this level, testing is concerned less with comparison and more with providing accurate diagnostic information to teachers and parents about each child's reading progress.

Schools and districts need to determine what information is most useful for what purposes in accordance with the needs of their students. Assessment of reading achievement may include a variety of test types: *norm-referenced tests* that compare performances of children at the same age or grade and are independent of the content of instruction; *criterion-referenced tests* that compare performance to standards deemed appropriate for a child relative to the mastery of an identified skill or component and are closely linked to the content of instruction; and, *observational tests* that document informal performance or behaviors in the context of classroom activities or processes.

Reading is a complex process and assessments must ensure that measured results are valid and reliable.

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Q Are we advocating the same kind of instruction for everyone?
How should we allow for individual differences in rate and manner of learning?

To meet the individual needs of all learners, each classroom teacher should be determining the need for flexible instructional groups. Children should be organized in whole groups, small groups, pairs, or as individuals for guided instruction. Districts need to ensure that all teachers understand the importance of flexible grouping when teaching reading. It is usually not efficient or effective for teachers to teach reading across the span of skill levels represented in an entire class of students. Flexible grouping helps teachers match instruction to the widely differing skill levels typically found in a classroom. Flexible groups can be skill-based and temporary, allowing instruction to align as much as possible with the skill levels of children in the group; children who learn at a faster or slower rate can be moved to different groups as necessary.

When English Language Learners begin to learn to read in English, either as their first reading experience or after learning to read in their home language, they can be most successful learning to read what they can already say and understand. As with all other learners, decodable texts should be used to provide these early readers with practice in becoming fluent and accurate decoders. Reading decodable and patterned texts, however, must be preceded by sufficient oral language development relative to those texts to ensure success in reading with these materials.

All students, regardless of home language or socioeconomic background, can and must have an equal opportunity to excel in reading.

(pg. 2, *Every Child a Reader*)

Q Is the initiative solidly based on extensive current research findings?

The challenge before us is to take action on the recommendations of the program advisory to ensure that virtually every child will learn to read well. The research of the last 25 years on successful practice in early reading has yet to be widely understood or applied. However, there is a convergence of research that finds that the best way to minimize the need for remedial services is to provide the best possible classroom instruction in the first place.

Reading instruction should focus on continuous measurement of progress with an emphasis on the patterns of reading growth of students in kindergarten through grade two as well as on prevention and early intervention strategies for children at risk for developing reading difficulties. Three central ideas — phonological awareness, alphabetic understanding, and using code automatically — permeate the beginning reading research and must be instructional priorities when designing and assessing beginning reading instruction.

Children's knowledge of the correspondences between spellings and sounds has been found to predict the speed and accuracy with which children can read single words, which, in turn, is found to predict their ability to comprehend written text. Clearly, readers with fast and accurate word recognition skills have greater cognitive resources to direct their attention to the meaning of what they read.

Children who quickly master the early stages of reading are more likely to find reading less aversive, less time-consuming, and more rewarding. As a result, better readers are likely to read more than children with poorer skills and, as a consequence, the children's early facility "cascades into a sea of advantages" (C. Juel, 1988).

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Q How well are teachers able to implement the instructional components of the Reading Program Advisory?
What will it take to prepare them?

All school districts and county offices of education serving students in kindergarten through grade three were invited to compete for Goals 2000 funds for the purpose of providing professional development in reading instruction to teachers of students in kindergarten through grade three and to district and site administrators. If teachers are to implement the recommendations of the program advisory, the Goals 2000 funds and other district resources must be allocated with a focus on the knowledge and skills necessary to implement the identified components of AB 3482.

The publication, *A Blueprint of Professional Development for Teachers of Early Reading Instruction*, defines key components of the California Reading Initiative and outlines the expected knowledge and skills of teachers. This document provides a solid basis for making decisions on the content of professional development seminars and workshop series funded by Goals 2000 and AB 3482 (See the Guide to the California Reading Initiative of 1996 for more detailed information).

Q Are there state level reading/language standards that districts should consult?
What other sources of guidance exist about teaching reading?

Reading and language arts standards are being developed by the Commission for the Establishment of Academic Content and Performance Standards. Drafts of the standards are expected to be completed by Spring 1997. In the meantime, copies of *Teaching Reading and the Language Arts Interim Challenge Standards and Samples of Student Work* may be obtained from the California Department of Education. Virginia, Florida, and Texas have state standards in development and are available through on-line and published documents. District administrators may be aware of other available resources on standards.

Reading is the most important academic skill and the foundation for all academic learning.

(pg. 1, *Every Child a Reader*)

Q What key questions regarding reading programs should board members ask of administrators?

- What is the district's agreed upon knowledge base for teaching beginning reading?
- How are schools determining that instructional practices are effective, cost-efficient, sustainable, and practical for teachers to use with all children?
- What student assessment data on reading achievement are guiding instructional decisions at the school?
- What early intervention programs are developed for children who are underachieving in reading?
- What are the essential components of reading and writing instruction that are necessary for English Language Learners to become proficient?
- How do the district and school professional development plans align with AB 3482?
- What coaching and mentoring strategies are in place to support new teachers, especially those teaching in kindergarten through grade two?
- What processes and criteria are in place for evaluating and piloting recommended instructional materials in reading and language arts?
- What school accountability systems are in place so that parents are assured that their children's instructional needs are being addressed?
- How are parents informed about the reading curriculum and encouraged to support the school's reading goals?

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How does the California Reading Initiative address the needs of English Language Learners (ELL)?

The program advisory, *Teaching Reading*, states that *any* early reading program must include the following instructional components: phonemic awareness; letter names and shapes; systematic, explicit phonics; spelling; vocabulary development; comprehension and higher-order thinking; and appropriate instructional materials. The strong research base for understanding how children learn to read and write an alphabetic writing system appears to be applicable for ELL students as well. English learners, however, require modifications in specific instructional strategies, such as the deliberate comparison of their primary language with English and reference to their primary language for understanding concepts. Students may need extensive work in vocabulary development and relevant background knowledge to comprehend what they read. They will be most successful learning to read what they can already say and understand.

The materials recently adopted by the state board include some excellent programs designed for Spanish-speaking students who will learn to read in Spanish before making the transition to English. The materials disseminated with the Comprehensive Reading Leadership Program modules include information that should be helpful in ensuring success for ELL within balanced, comprehensive programs. Additional research supporting the validity of specific instructional practices with well-defined populations of children is needed to guide continuing refinements in instructional practice.

Teaching children to read must be the first priority of everyone who cares about children.

(pg. 14, *Every Child a Reader*)



What Does a Complete, Balanced Reading Program Look Like in Kindergarten through Grade Three?

What program components should be observable in a classroom?

Reading does not occur in isolation. Reading, writing, listening, and speaking are linked as a child becomes fluent in English language arts. A range of instructional activities might be occurring in a reading classroom on any given visit where children could be working alone, in pairs, in small groups or in whole-class configurations. The following suggestions exemplify effective instructional practices and models:

- A variety of oral language, listening, and speaking activities linked to a variety of readings, including fiction, nonfiction, and science or social studies texts. Storytelling, retelling, reading aloud, choral reading, plays, and explanations are other examples.
- A strong literature, language, and comprehension program that includes environmental print materials, student compositions, classroom anthologies, trade books, chapter books, core works of fiction and nonfiction, magazines, newspapers, reference materials, and technology.
- Organized sound, symbol and structure instructional sequences that focus on phoneme (sounds in spoken language) awareness, print awareness, and syntactic (structure) awareness. Such activities include rhyming, blending and segmenting of sounds, recognizing word patterns; and understanding increasingly more complex concepts about print, sentences, story structures, and beginning grammar.
- Integration of skills such as letter recognition, high frequency words, word patterns, phonics, decoding and *word-attack* skills into an explicit, systematic program that begins in kindergarten and builds toward more complexity as children are learning how to read.

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- Reading to, with, and by children to foster fluency, increase comprehension, and increase content-area and recreational reading. Goals should include each child reading 100-200 little books on a variety of topics by the end of first grade and 25-35 grade-level books by the second and third grades.
- Writing activities that build toward increasingly more independence, complexity, and correctness. Writing instruction should focus on building fluency and correct letter shapes leading to words, sentences, and longer student-generated writing (stories, essays, descriptions, responses to readings, summaries, answers to questions, etc.).
- Sequenced vocabulary and spelling instruction that alerts children to the patterns and meanings of words, and how words are put together. By focusing on root words, prefixes, and suffixes, this instruction builds toward eventual correctness. Spelling lists need to follow stages of spelling development and support reading and writing instruction. Vocabulary instruction that provides opportunities for students to identify the meanings of new words encountered in reading has been shown to be the most effective when word definitions are complemented by attention to usage and shades of meanings across contexts.
- A variety of assessment tools and strategies necessary to plan daily instruction, which should be used three to four times a year to assess progress toward grade level standards or expectations. Student skills may be assessed with a list that begins with single letters and progresses to complex words. Texts used for assessment of fluency and comprehension should be ordered with respect to difficulty as well.